CREATORS TALKING ABOUT FLOWER OF ROMANCE AND PERSONA

In a flower field where strong souls dance to be free, with lightness and flexibility unhampered by previous creations, a movement that has defined the ’90s now spreads its wings.

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It's not a *Megami Tensei* game

—So, **Megami Ibunroku Persona** *[hereafter simply* **Persona***] is the latest in the* **Megami Tensei** *series, and like* **if...**, *it's a story centered around school life...*

Okada: It's not a *Megami Tensei* game this time. It's not a sequel to *if...*, but rather a school-life story with true-to-life situations centered around interconnectedness. We brought characters to the fore back with *Devil Summoner*, but this time it's different. We wanted to establish not just the protagonist but those around him.

Kaneko: With *Persona*, we've expanded on the image of the Guardians from *if...*. The idea that got things going was that of a Guardian capable of attacking directly.

Okada: At the end of the day, the series is still called *Megami Tensei*, but this is not a *Megami Tensei* game—nor is it *if... 2*. It's an independent title that can stand alone better even than *Devil Summoner*. Whether it's with the isometric view, the fact that characters are now visible on-screen because of it, or the absence of the Demon Summoning Program, we've made a game that allows for a higher degree of freedom—in a positive sense.

Treating the combat as events, too

—The combat scenes are a stand-out feature this time.

Okada: Even though there are laborious parts like grinding for experience, we didn't approach combat intending to make things feel like a tactical game. In our case, since we were already locked into having demons appear, we were all the more keen to emphasize why players should defeat or else negotiate with them. And so that's why we adopted the philosophy that combat can also be an event. I thought, "You know, these demons aren't just any old enemies." With the component of growth and especially with negotiation, you get the sense that there's a lot of variation, you know? Each of your partners can call out a Persona or try conversing with a demon. In terms of degree of freedom, I guess that's where you find the extent of it.

Kaneko: The game is honestly jam-packed with features, so I feel like there are a hundred different ways you can go about playing it. It's very accommodating. For instance, you can raise those Personas we just mentioned, or you can choose not to raise them and go ahead and collect cards. It all comes down to personal preference. You can play it like a tactical game and focus on the strategic aspects, or you can power up your Personas and enjoy it like a monster-raising game. There are all sorts of ways to have fun.

Persona doesn't really exist

Īda: Was it you who came up with the pharmacy song, Mr. Satomi?

Satomi: My understanding with that one is that one of the sound people wrote the lyrics and then the chief of the sound team sang them.

Kaneko: Amazing. Our games really are homemade like that. The party members are performed by voice actors, but the voices for the demons are all done by staff at the company—and not just developers. If a demon seems like it has the vibe of an older man, we'll go to a department full of older men. It makes the fighting feel more rewarding when you know who the voices actually belong to [laughs].

Okada: Like, "Oh, it's that guy" [laughs]. But when we do use voice actors, we always get really high-quality stuff. The singer for the Velvet Room is a professional opera singer. However…

Īda: That's not really something you'd market.

Okada: Right.

Īda: What was your reason for choosing Satomi to fill such an important role?

Kaneko: He came on board saying he wanted to do the scenario.

Okada: His selection had partly to do with this not being a *Megami Tensei* game. We wanted to bring in some totally fresh blood.

Īda: And how did it go?

Satomi: It was incredibly fun. I felt psyched. Because it's the poster child of Atlas, you know? So I was really happy when I suddenly got the go-ahead.

Kaneko: It's happening now, isn't it? The truth is a lie. *Persona* doesn't really exist.

Satomi: I am the butterfly… I am not the butterfly…

Kaneko: Yeah, there you go.

Satomi: Shucks.

Kaneko: Shucks indeed. That's the theme of the game right there.

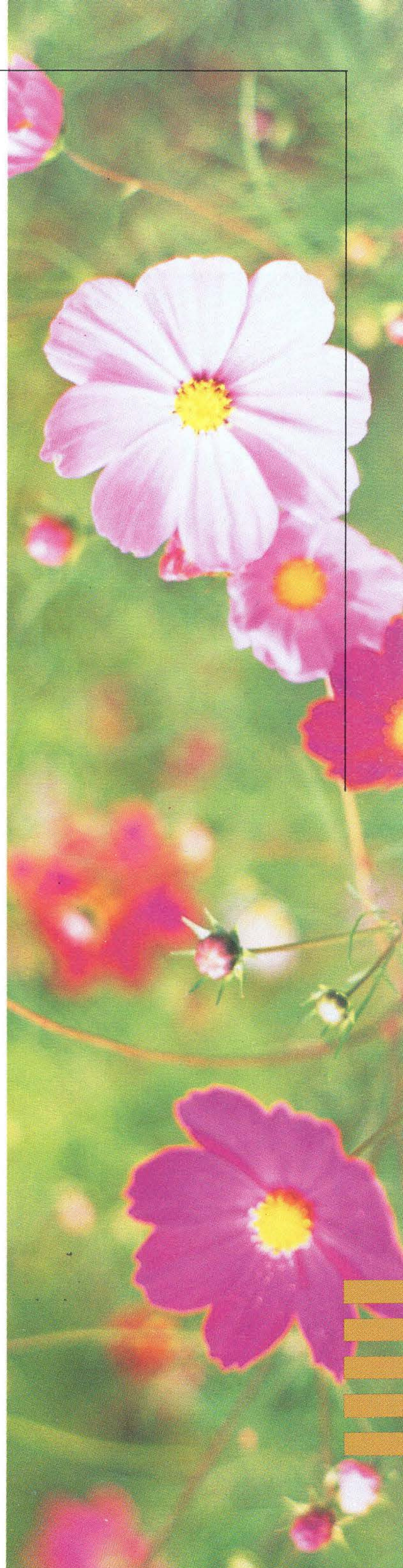
Okada: So that was part of the reason he was selected. But before now, he'd only ever been a player of games, so he didn't have a very good grasp on what the game needed or how things should flow. And so at first he was of the mind that it should feel something like a movie or a novel. In the very beginning he'd come up to me and be like, "Wouldn't it be really interesting if I wrote this like a novel?" and I'd be like, "We can't use something like that with a game." So as you might expect, the scenario this time took longer to finish than any of the previous ones.

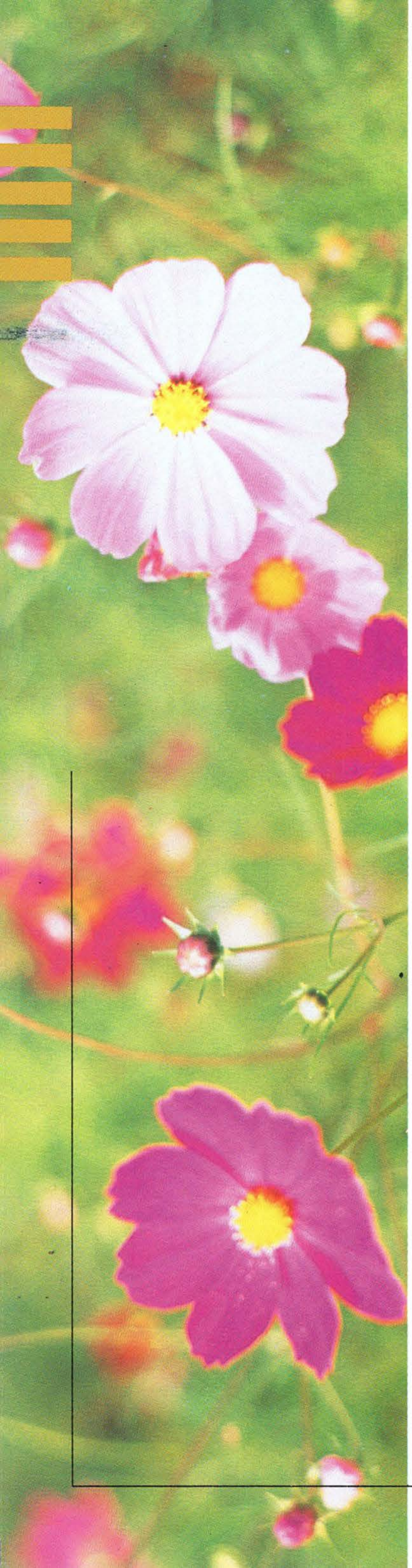
It seemed like it would be interesting if one of them died in an explosion

Īda: Which came first, the scenario or the characters?

Satomi: The scenario came first.

Okada: Though of course, even from the beginning the plan was to put emphasis on the characters in the main party.





Satomi: We tried to ensure each character was really thinking things through, and made it so that when you talk to them, it's clear what's going through their head.

Kaneko: For instance, because of his personality, Nanjō will speak up on his own.

Okada: At first we considered having each partner go their separate way and then join back up again, but not in an anthologized kind of way. However, if everyone were to split up and remain that way, they wouldn't intersect, which would be pretty boring. So instead of doing that, we decided to keep everything unified, figuring it would be best to focus on a fixed group of regular characters. Even though the human drama aspect remains the same, we thought how players feel might change depending on whom they choose as partners.

Satomi: It's also set up so that the ending will change depending on the partners you choose.

—Speaking of the ending, why did Nanjō end up not dying? In the early materials for the ending, where it goes over everyone's day-to-day life after everything's over, it says he died...

Satomi: It seemed like it would be interesting if one of them died in an explosion.

Kaneko: No, no, that wouldn't have worked. But that necktie with the number 1 on it had me laughing a lot.

Īda: Were you the one who decided whether he would die or not, Mr. Kaneko?

Kaneko: Well, not on my own. The image of it just felt too dark. Ayase's stuff was also super dark at first.

Satomi: At first I thought I'd write an ending where she's checking her wrinkles in a train station bathroom, worrying if she's already missed the boat, so to speak. It seemed like the natural outcome.

Kaneko: It's not an ending fit for someone who's been on such a huge adventure. Though I suppose one could argue it's good to have that sort of anticlimax.

It's his complex regarding Yamaoka

Īda: Why does Reiji have a scar on his forehead?

Kaneko: We have *Ai to Makoto* [a popular '70s manga serialized in *Shōnen Magazine* whose protagonist bears a scar on his forehead] to thank for that [laughs]. But the backstory is that Reiji got it while protecting his mother from Kandori.

Satomi: I guess that explanation doesn't come up in the game.

—There aren't any fathers in the picture this time, are there? It's all about everyone's relationship with their mother.

Kaneko: Well, that's the Oedipus complex. Don't all men have one deep down somewhere? What is it for women?

Īda: An Electra complex? Like Aki with Kandori...

Kaneko: Right. She's drawn to dangerous people, to people who treat her gently. That kind of thing.

Īda: Complexes crop up quite a bit throughout the story. Though I didn't really understand what Elly's was.

Satomi: Elly's constantly been crafting her self-image her whole life, and it's something she's always struggled against. But she's afraid to tear down the facade she's created…

Okada: She's sort of been playing the part of the good girl.

Satomi: For Mark, it's getting away from his parents. And in Nanjō's case, it's his complex regarding Yamaoka.

Kaneko: With Yamaoka gone, he can't do anything. He's sympathetic in that sense.

Satomi: The character premises were put together by myself, Ide [responsible for character premises and system configuration], and Kaneko. We incorporated complexes as a means to express the game's theme and give the characters more depth, as opposed to just having them be pieces on the board. In adolescence especially, people suffer from all sorts of complexes like anxiety or envy. We wanted to show these characters overcoming such obstacles and growing as humans, and for everyone playing to think on that deeply. That's the message that the Persona team as a whole is trying to send. Kandori is a mass of complexes, but ultimately he's a child who never grew up. I hope that's something we can communicate to the audience as well. That's the implication behind his love of oddly child-like schemes. If players can sympathize with even just one of these characters and stop to think for a

COZY OKADA

Full Name: Kōji Okada
Date of Birth: Undisclosed
Responsibility: Direction
Favorite Character and Why: Mark - At the start of development, he was going to be more of a high-energy character, but he's a pure-hearted guy with a single-minded devotion to Maki.
Thoughts on the '70s: I was just becoming aware of Western music, and was obsessed with playing the drums. Back then, it was all about living in the moment…

Full Name: Kazuma Kaneko
Date of Birth: 9/20/1964
Responsibilities: World setting and lore, character design
Favorite Character and Why: Yukino - It may sound strange to say, but for me she's the most exemplary character in terms of the game's theme.
Thoughts on the '70s: It was the era when my "exterior" formed. I was influenced by all sorts of things. But what was most formative was this urge to be even more like Tony from *Saturday Night Fever* than Travolta himself, which had me going to the disco constantly. Back then, I thought it was super cool to have a cool time with cool guys at cool places in the nightlife districts. Looking back on it now, it's hard not to burst out laughing.

KAZUMA KANEKO

moment, then I'll be over the moon. The folding screen in Kandori's room in the Deva Yuga has a famous poem Nobunaga danced to. Kandori has cynically placed it there as an expression of his indifference to everything. Kandori is a master of controlling other people's hearts, but in the end he can't do anything by himself. Even when it comes to expressing his feelings in a poem, he can only do so by using one someone else made. That's the implication behind that decoration being there.

Okada: The Persona Nyarlathotep is Kanodri's mask—a symbol of his chaotic heart. He's saddled himself with this absurd mission of bringing ruin to humanity, and it's with that goal he tries to establish a sense of self, all the while mired in doubt about his own existence. The Cthulhu Mythos refers to Nyarlathotep by various epithets—the Faceless God, the God of a Thousand Forms, the Crawling Chaos—and describes him as a terrible cynic who scorns even himself and his master [the spirit of the idiot god Azathoth, who resides at the heart of the cosmos]. When he interferes with mankind, he doesn't wield his power directly but operates more like a trickster, inducing foolhardy humans to self-destruction.

—Has Kandori read the Cthulhu Mythos?

Okada: Perhaps his cynical equation of something with no raison d'être to something with no face is what unconsciously determined the form his Persona takes. I imagine he had some craving for overwhelming power—a desire to be something faceless, which in turn could don any face, which in turn could transcend self-doubt. Nyarlathotep is a mask that contains conflicting meanings. Reiji's sense of self solidifies around a powerful drive to defeat Kandori, and when Kandori is actually defeated, that sense of self is lost. I think if Reiji had defeated Kandori by himself, it's likely that he would have spent the remainder of his life solely on his mother, and after losing that as well, he would have become despondent, with no drive whatsoever.

—But in the end he works together with his companions.

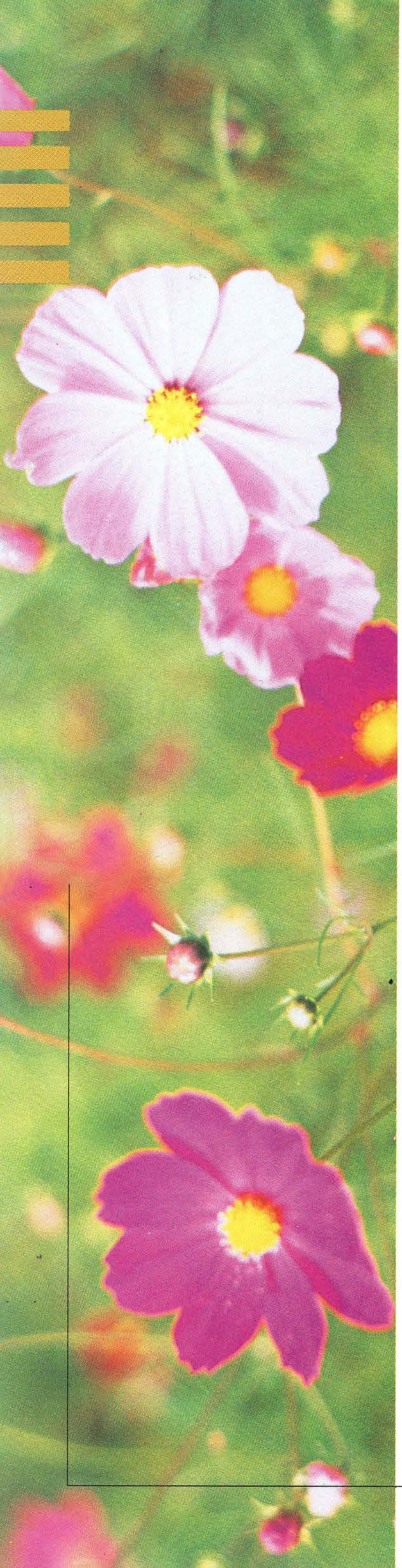
Okada: And it's thanks to that his inner objective gradually changes, without him even realizing it—from fighting to kill to fighting to protect. We can see this in his own dialogue as well, when he says "for my mother and my friends" just before confronting Kandori in the final battle. Reiji, too, has matured to a place where he seeks his own raison d'être instead of chasing Kandori's shadow. And in mastering the Persona Kandori once possessed, he's able to overcome him in the truest sense. It also means nothing less than that Reiji understands Kandori's heart. Perhaps many years down the road, we'll see Reiji standing alone at Kandori's grave, before a tombstone nobody ever comes to visit.

"Can we really do something like this?"

Īda: Why did you implement that gauge that shows stuff like eagerness?

Okada: Aside from making the conversations feel realistic, it's simply a tool to help players win. Each of the five party members can choose from four actions, for a total of 20 possible choices. If we'd done things the same way we had up till now, players would be left scratching their heads about what to do. We didn't include 20 choices just because we favored quantity over quality; we did it as a way to make each character stand out. We also wanted to represent more demon emotions than just friendliness and obedience, so eventually we settled on those four… But even then, the staff initially didn't want them to show up. They were worried having them displayed like that would make things too obvious.

Īda: In uncharitable terms, it's a very labor-intensive search for that one correct option. But put more positively, it grants



an unprecedented amount of freedom by expanding the number of choices you can make.

Okada: It is labor-intensive, but the main point of it all is to have that give and take. We wanted to distinguish the dialogue there from the actual action. Well, I suppose at the end of the day it was actually just because we wanted to have spell cards.

—I felt like the characters stood out more during dialogue than during events. For instance, Nanjō's Bribe action is called the Nanjō Special. It gave me a lot of pleasure using it on dumb enemies.

Īda: It's that 10 yen coin with the back and front reversed. Looks like it works.

Okada: It's really fun to see them all fall for it. Honesty or flattery alone won't work for everyone, though. That's why we've sort of fused those things. It's the same with showing those four Contact emotions. We wanted to break away from this overfixation we'd had on forcing players to sense the nuance behind what enemies were saying. Hence why we brought in new people—that fresh blood. But it turned out that blood had already soaked in quite a bit. They'd be like, "Can we really do something like this?"

Kaneko: I also wanted to have a time limit. But I got told off once again. I'd really like to have a requirement to beat the game in under two hours or something. That sort of thing is really appealing to me. But the problem is there are so many routes you can take.

Okada: Kaneko got really obsessed with the Snow Queen Quest. That was his poison.

Īda: What made you decide to create both the SEBEC and Snow Queen Quests?

Okada: *if…* made a really strong impression with how you get to choose a partner. But we started off with this idea that you'd probably have some players who were raring to go and take down the baddie, while others would want to make sure everything was safe at school first. It also lends itself to establishing the characters. You've got some people, like Nanjō and Mark, who are gung ho about setting out, while others aren't. We wanted to depict what those characters are thinking in addition to the choices the protagonist makes.

Īda: There's also this subtle change in the speed of the dialogue when making choices…

Kaneko: That's a subtle little trick, isn't it? Those all had to be done carefully, one-by-one. Everyone here's so meticulous. You know, that Pipo-kun at the police station… Doesn't he kind of look like a panda? [The real Pipo-kun police mascot is yellow, but in the game, he has a white body and black sunglasses.]

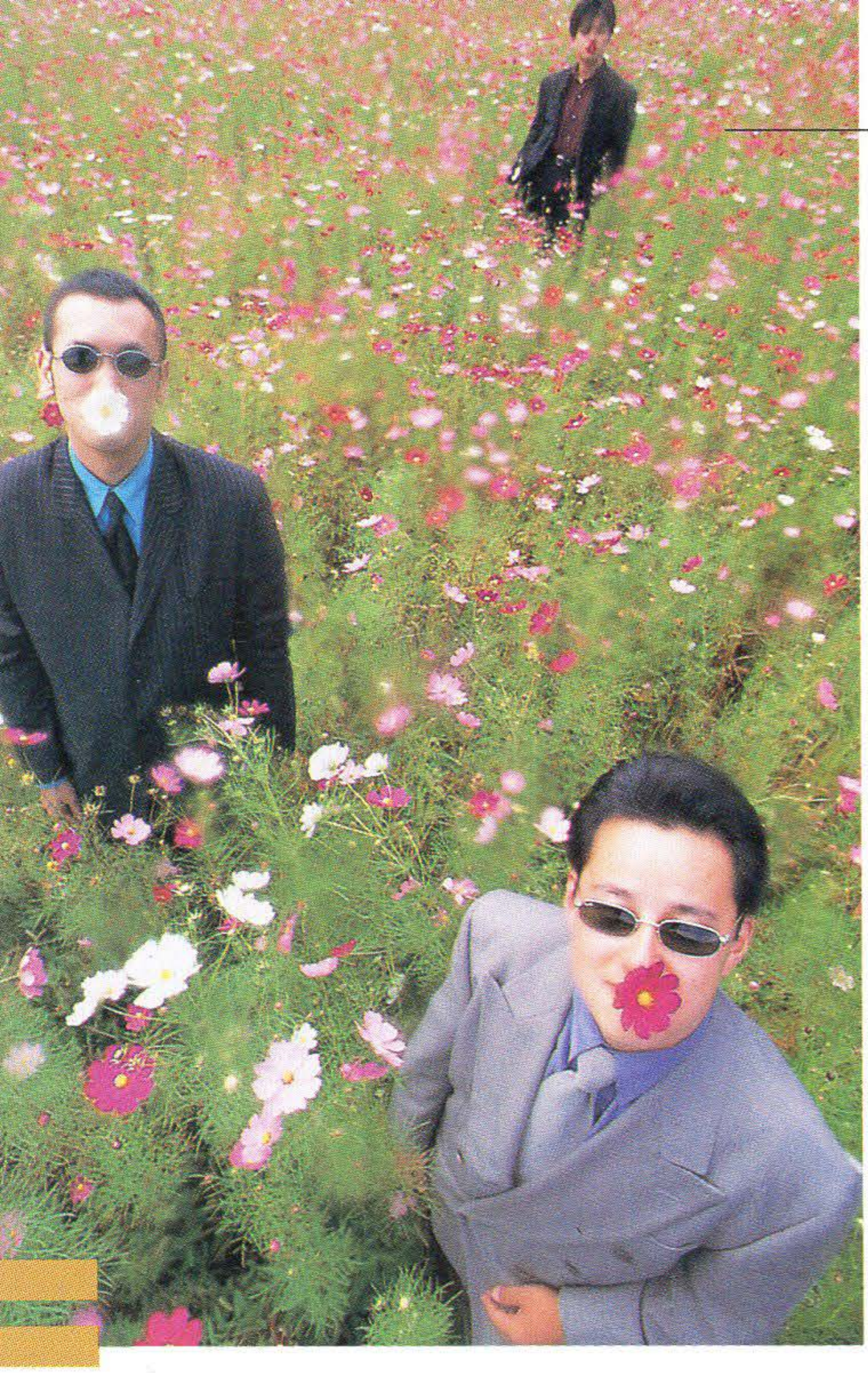
TADASHI SATOMI

Full Name: Tadashi Satomi
Date of Birth: 5/18/1970
Responsibility: Scenario
Favorite Characters and Why:
Tamaki - She's bright and lively and cute. / Mark - I like how devoted he is. I think devotion is a number-one value everyone needs to remember.
Thoughts on the '70s: I remember being totally horrified by the TV version of *Submersion of Japan*, singing along to Linda Yamamoto, and crying in confusion when Candies broke up. I also remember getting a mild case of thinner poisoning while assembling a plastic model Zaku [a mobile suit that appears in the anime *Mobile Suit Gundam*]. And I remember witnessing Char's onslaught from the ceiling and the walls, learning firsthand the terror of the Red Comet.

—I've actually had an eye on those Pipo-kuns. There was one in the last game, too. Is this some sort of hobby for you, Mr. Kaneko?
Kaneko: It's a fascination of mine. It would be terrifying to get attacked by something like that, wouldn't it? Like if Mickey Mouse started wailing on you. Or a teddy bear or something, you know?

Conversations with some unspecified other

—If everyone who dreamed of Philemon can use Personas, does that mean Kandori also dreamed of him?
Okada: The students had that dream because they played Persona, but that isn't the case for Kandori and Takeda. There must, then, be some connection with the DEVA system, but no, they didn't dream of him. This means that the potential to use Personas exists in everyone, or at least did at some point. It was only by circumstance that the protagonists as well as Kandori and Takeda awakened to that potential.
Satomi: Everyone struggles with a complex to some degree, but they all have a firm sense of self. Considering that Philemon asks everyone who visits if they're capable of stating their name, I'm pretty sure if Kandori were to dream of him, he'd just be like, "Who the hell do you think you're talking to?"
Kaneko: He'd say that? Kandori, I mean.
Satomi: He'd definitely say that.
Īda: How about that Zhuangzi poem at the beginning?
Satomi: The theme this time is something like "I think therefore I am," and I struggled till the end trying to figure out what I should put as the final line.



Kaneko: We talked about inserting "cogito ergo sum" at the beginning, right? During the opening?

— I got that sense, especially with the SEBEC Quest. The sense that this was a mass illusion everyone could perceive because it was a direct actualization of the subjects' own cognition.

Okada: Exactly.

Kaneko: Well, was it an illusion, though?

Satomi: It's there in that line Maki says, too. I personally truly believe there are both gods and demons within people's hearts. Put differently, people's hearts are the only place where those things reside. I got to wondering if gods and demons and humans are all one and the same, and I tried to come up with a way to illustrate that phenomenon that was different from what had come before. That was how I landed on the idea of Personas. The term "persona" classically refers to a much shallower sort of psychic veneer, but I thought it seemed more appropriate than "shadow" [a psychology term meaning "shadow self"] due to its imagery of replacement through fusion. As for the worldbuilding, I knew from the beginning that I didn't want to have something where you just defeat the final boss and rejoice when the world is saved. So in that sense, the general framework was decided upon rather early. From that concept of not defeating a boss but instead saving someone, the idea of Maki being the heroine also took shape quite early on. And so as I weaved in this basic concept of people not just playing the game but thinking back on their own feelings and such, I had repeated discussions with Okada and Kaneko and Chief Ide, and things gradually came together. We all talked about our past experiences and the types of people we'd once known, often going on long tangents, and there's no denying those conversations served as a sort of fertilizer. I'd heard when the project launched that the story would cover only a very limited geographical area, but as a game, I knew it would need to engage people's interest in a territory altogether uncharted. At first I felt like tearing my hair out. It seemed like too great a task. But ultimately I feel like I was able to sublimate those emotions quite well. Though I've still got a lot of work left to do. Oh, also, Philemon mentions how he's "a dweller between consciousness and unconsciousness." This is because he's an entity who resides within each and every person.

Kaneko: There's this depiction of moments where you have to surmount or cross through something as conversations with some unspecified other. And so in that regard there's a philosophical angle at work. I think players will have a wonderful time if they can open their imaginations.

Flowers and butterflies

Īda: Lately it seems like the hippie movement of the late '60s and '70s has been gaining popularity again. Us using a flower field today is sort of a reflection of that flower movement.

Kaneko: It's nice. There's this element of things coming together. All these titles coming out one after another, like *Persona*.

Okada: Up till now we've had a problem with timing and sort of rushing things. I wonder if we've finally hit that sweet spot.

Kaneko: Mm… There are a lot of cases where we'll look back and be like, "Oh, we should have released that then."

Okada: For instance, after *if…* was released, this movie called *Seven* came out. And then not long after, there was also a kind of boom in the school genre.

Īda: Even visually you seem to stake some claim to that kind of thing, like with the 1964 school badges.

Okada: Maybe I don't speak for everyone, but that was a way of visually establishing the characters. I think the scenario has a certain power to do that, but that was an instance where I was like, "We've got so many of these characters, please just slap this on them." I was a little worried about it…

Kaneko: As I recall, you didn't even say please.

Okada: Ah, sorry about that.

Īda: They are well established, though.

Kaneko: Thanks to everyone's hard work. But that '70s feel was something I had in mind—how it's been resurging. In that case, I guess the keywords are still the same. Flowers and butterflies.

Okada: Lately we've been able to get straight to showing stuff like that.

Kaneko: Right. Before it was all hidden. But if that's the only thing you do, it gets boring. I wanted to do something a little different—something with more unique subject matter.

Okada: I think we make these characters attractive not just on the outside but on the inside as well.

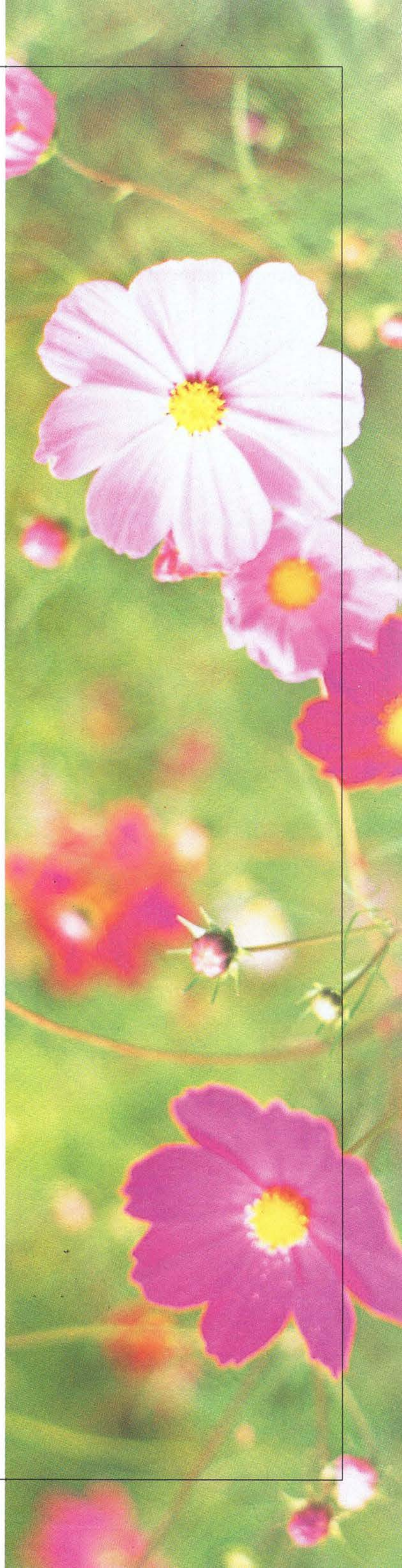
Kaneko: And that goes back to those complexes we mentioned. Even though they're separate people, they all have something we can relate to somewhat. They're all weak in some way.

Okada: The '70s weren't something I personally had in mind, but I do think our current age is one where individuality is lacking. So there is this focus on an era with more individuality.

Kaneko: A sense of recreating an age of individuality, I guess.

Okada: That's why youth is sort of an embarrassing time. It's a time where you take chances—when you find out what you like and dislike. It's not about falling in love.

Kaneko: It was a nice time, wasn't it? Well, for me at least. I had that Saturday night fever [laughs].



Nobody's saying we won't make another one [laughs]

— Is there some parallel world connection between Tamaki and **if...?** *There was a character like that in your previous game,* **Devil Summoner.**

Kaneko: The previous game had a realistic setting, but this time there's no connection to it whatsoever. That character's just...

Satomi: I'm a really big fan of Yuki Uchida, you see.

Kaneko: Tamaki is actually Yuki Uchida. Sorry they don't look much alike.

Satomi: No, no, no. I love her. I even have her set as my desktop background.

— So Tamaki saying "now it's your turn"...

Kaneko: Hey, don't you dare bring up that line.

Īda: But you even drew her face the same.

Kaneko: They're ganging up on us.

Okada: Can't blame them.

Kaneko: Sorry to disappoint you, but it's all accurate. Maybe if you made us a correlation chart like the one you did for *Genma Wars*, we could make it clear.

Īda: Some of those who've been playing *Megami Tensei* since the NES era wonder if you'll ever return to the grand narratives of *Shin Megami Tensei*. You said earlier that this game isn't a *Megami Tensei* title, which makes me wonder if you plan to make a *Megami Tensei* game again...

Satomi: Is that so?

Okada: Well, nobody's saying we won't make another one [laughs].

Satomi: So are we making one?

Okada: Just whose side are you on here?

Everyone: [Laughs]

— Well, we're looking forward to your next game more and more. Thank you all so much for your time today.